

Euripides in the modern world

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We can observe some remarkable points of contact between the plays of Euripides and the actors on today's world stage. Straightforward 'translation' between ancient and modern worlds is not easy, but recognising the combination of familiarity and difference in the works of the ancient playwright can make for rewarding reading.

Since the year 2000, 447 productions of classical tragedies and comedies have been performed by schools and amateur and professional companies in England alone. It's a huge number. And before that, the twentieth century saw almost a decade-on-decade increase in the number of productions of Greek and Roman drama. Add to that the recent spate of films like *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *Gladiator*, and the message is clear. Creative industries and audiences alike are looking to the culture and ideas of the classical world for inspiration.

A production of one of Euripides' last plays, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, staged at London's National Theatre in 2004 is a good example of how a play, despite being written for another culture and in another age, managed to provoke a particularly strong reaction amongst the general public.

Iphigenia in Aulis – why do we go to war?

The *Iphigenia in Aulis* tells of the immediate events that led up to the Trojan War. Agamemnon has launched the thousand ships in order to reclaim his brother Menelaus' wife Helen from the Trojan prince, Paris. However, a god has prevented them from crossing the final stretch of water to Troy and demands the sacrifice of Agamemnon's eldest daughter, Iphigenia. Realizing he has no choice but to go through with the horrific murder of his own daughter, Agamemnon has sent word back home to his wife that Iphigenia is to be married to none other than the famous Achilles – a ruse in order to get the girl to where the ships are gathered, Aulis. The plot is discovered but, in the end, Iphigenia decides to give herself willingly to be sacrificed 'for the glory of Greece'. The play ends as the wind begins to pick up and the Greek fleet sets off to war.

In spite of the odd-sounding character names, the intrigue of the gods, and the backdrop of an ancient heroic code, audiences of the *Iphigenia in Aulis* in 2004 loved the play and felt it had a direct bearing on the contemporary discussion of war. The still recent decision by this country's government to enter into war with Iraq in 2003 was, after all, still fresh in everyone's minds.

A number of pivotal issues are dissected in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. What are our motivations for going to war? For Menelaus, it was to recapture his wife Helen. For Tony Blair it was the pursuit of the, as it turned out, fictitious Weapons of Mass Destruction. What are the personal sacrifices made in war and how does the public then justify those sacrifices? Tackling such questions, the play couldn't help but resonate with our concerns in those early years of the twenty-first century.

'One of the most caustically insightful studies ever written of the twisted psychology and murky self-serving motives of men about to embark on war'

said one theatre critic. This tragedy of Euripides was able to reflect the audience's own concerns; the play was without a doubt relevant in modern society.

Trojan Women – after the war

Looking at another work of Euripides, the *Trojan Women*, you begin to get a sense of why this author has been so popular in recent decades. In that play the subject again is war, but instead of looking at what causes humans to go to war, this time Euripides holds up the consequences for our consideration.

The Trojan queen Hecuba, wife of the recently-killed Priam, mother of the

recently-killed Hector, waits to hear who of the Greeks she will be given to as a slave. As women on the losing side, she and the other widows of Troy will now have to serve the men that killed their husbands and children. The city's famous towers are still smoking as the last members of the Trojan royal family spend their final hours on home shores.

The complete ruin of the city and its people as described by the characters of Hecuba, Andromache, and the chorus of Trojan women (who give the play its name) travels with eerie clarity to us today. Rubbled towns, parents who have lost children, and soldiers, themselves victims of the horrors of war, perpetrating acts of indescribable inhumanity; these are all images that are, unfortunately, only too familiar. In this play's text we see images described that appear nightly on our laptop and television screens. 'The children are thronging at the gates' the chorus of Trojan women tell us, 'tears streaming and crying their broken cry'. They could be describing a refugee camp in modern-day Jordan.

A cultural difference in Euripides

The potential in the plays of Euripides to communicate with modern-day audiences is not the whole story though, nor should it be our only reason for paying attention to this particular playwright. For one thing there is much in these classical tragedies that we might find puzzling on first, second, and third readings. Some of the unusual features can be explained by a better understanding of the conventions of Athenian drama and its social and political context. Other aspects, like that of the chorus, benefit from closer study of the text and its relation to the themes and shape of the play as a whole. And it's the chorus that, even for enthusiastic theatre-makers, can often be, initially, problematic.

We find a chorus in every ancient Athenian drama, consisting of a group of men or women (and occasionally deities or mythical creatures like satyrs). They could participate in the plot development, or provide backstories and act as a counterpoint to the fiercely individual heroic characters they share the stage with. Yet

the presence of such a group watching, listening, and adding their thoughts on events as they unfold pushes the limits of theatrical realism by modern standards. In this respect, the idea of Euripides as a wholly 'modern' ancient playwright becomes a little more complicated.

Euripides' innovative use of the chorus in his dramas often challenges how we understand theatre functions. His *Electra* has been one play that, more than most, has been seen to contain apparently unrelated choral odes and hence an unconvincing structure.

***Electra* – a case study for choral 'action'**

The *Electra* presents the return of Orestes to Argos in order to avenge his father's murder. With the help of his long-lost sister Electra, the plot to kill their own mother, their father's murderer, succeeds, but with disastrous consequences for the siblings. Yet early on in the play, the chorus sing of how a different heroic figure, Achilles, first voyaged to Troy and the women give a detailed description of his armour, the centrepiece of which is a depiction of Perseus carrying the head of the Gorgon. All this is hardly germane to the burgeoning matricidal plot of Electra and Orestes, surely?

Reading the ode in its dramatic context, we can see Euripides' purpose more clearly. In the lines just prior to the choral song, Electra has been having a go at her husband, a humble farmer, in a manner more suited to a character in a soap opera than a Greek tragedy. As any decently brought up Greek would, her husband, a farmer, has invited Orestes and his companion to step inside their home for a bite to eat, which the travellers readily accept. As soon as they are out of earshot, Electra scolds her husband (I paraphrase):

'What were you thinking inviting those smart people into our house? We haven't a thing in the larder to give them.'

We can almost hear the poor farmer's careworn sigh as he says

'But dearest, these look like nicely brought up folk, I'm sure they won't mind our rustic ways. Anyway, you women are always good at finding something or other in the larder.'

A peeved Electra goes into the house and, with an irony that is characteristic of Euripides, we are rather suddenly transported away from Electra's domestic concerns to the highfalutin and idealized world of the Homeric hero and figures even older than he who belong to a sparkling, and definitely not domestic, world.

The point of all this is to show up something about the 'heroic' figures like

Electra here. While songs such as the chorus sing may tell of daring deeds and great heroes, in this play we find no such figures, only shrewish wives and cowardly sons (you'll have to read the play to see how clearly Orestes would rather do *anything* than kill his own mother). The potential for the chorus to bring the ideal heroic world to the forefront at this juncture in the drama allows Euripides to undercut the idealized figures that fill so many Greek tragedies. It's a complex move, but deeply brilliant.

So why then should we bother with Euripides? For one thing it's clear that his voice is one that has been able to reach thousands, millions even, of theatregoers across twenty-five centuries – he must be doing something right. But there is also a great deal more to be gained from delving deeper into his dramatic technique and arguing with others about it. Was he really an 'anti-war' poet? Why did he seem to focus on female figures in myth? Ultimately, it's the superb combination of difference and similarity that makes his plays satisfying as well as challenging. And we all like a challenge, don't we?

Modern productions and the chorus

- W. B. Yeats' production of *King Oedipus* (1926) at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin had a chorus of five men as the Theban elders, who sang together with their chorus leader but did not dance.
- Brecht's *Antigone of Sophocles* (1948), first performed in Chur, Switzerland, had a predominantly static chorus of four men who held up sticks with white 'primitive'-looking masks over the faces while they sang.
- A Japanese version of *Medea* (1978–1999) directed by Yukio Ninagawa had an all-male chorus of sixteen who played *shamisens* (a banjo-like instrument) in unison and evoked specifically Japanese theatre styles (Kabuki and Bunraku) in their dress and movement.
- Director Katie Mitchell's production of *Women of Troy* (2008) at the National Theatre in London had a chorus of eight women who alternated between hyper-naturalistic behaviours (reapplying lipstick, fiddling with handbags) and a more stylized use of slow-motion ballroom dancing.
- An *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2013) at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, New York, had three women as the chorus who sang, acted, and interjected like a punk band, singing expletive-littered songs inspired by the odes of Euripides, evoking the performances of Russian activists 'Pussy Riot'.

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